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# **CHALLENGING THE OFFICIAL DISCOURSE ON RETURN POLICIES: THE RELEVANCE OF A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH IN POST-WAR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**

**SANDRINE BRETONNIÈRE**

## *Abstract*

Favoring the return of refugees and of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their pre-war homes is one of the cornerstones of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreements which put an end to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The policy's objective was to reverse the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by warring parties, and to allow individuals and families to restart their lives as soon as possible (a common assumption being that refugees are in a time and psychological limbo). Based on ethnographic data collected over four years in the post-war period, I will show that return is a dynamic and multi-directional process, with complex individual and collective parameters. The decision to return is neither uniform nor universal; it is a personal response to fear, trauma, experience in exile or in displacement, and one's ability to adjust to a post-war environment with new constraints. In this perspective, my purpose in this article is to underscore how qualitative research methods allow the emergence of a social reality largely downplayed (or ignored) by political and institutional actors.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Institutional return policy, Armed conflict, Ethnographic research methodology.

## **I. Introduction**

Within the larger context of the disintegration of Tito's Yugoslavia, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina started on April 6, 1992 when Serb forces set up a first checkpoint in Sarajevo. The conflict quickly spread to the entire country. In this first phase, the Serb forces fought against the Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian Muslims (each group set up its own army). There then emerged a second conflict between the Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian Muslims. The Americans mediated a peace agreement between those two belligerents in March 1994, then helped the newly formed coalition regain territory in the fall of 1995 against the Bosnian Serbs. The balance of power shifted in favor of the Muslim-Croat forces, and a comprehensive peace settlement was subsequently signed by the Bosnian President (Alija Izetbegović), the Croat President (Franjo Tuđman) and the Serb President (Slobodan Milošević) in Paris in December 1995. The

Peace Agreement, which had been negotiated in Dayton in the United States, established Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state composed of two entities – the Republika Srpska and the Croat-Muslim Federation. It stipulated that the country was home to three main national groups: the Bosniacs (formerly known as the Bosnian Muslims), the Croats, and the Serbs. All were to be Bosnian citizens. Consequently, the Presidency was to be shared between representatives of those three communities, by way of a rotating presidency. Furthermore, each entity maintained a certain degree of autonomy in public policy-making. This new country was to be supervised by an international body: the Office of the High Representative (OHR). In the face of rising difficulties on the political scene, OHR was endowed with overreaching powers in 1997. The Bonn powers, as they are referred to, “[...] allowed [the High Representative] to dismiss elected politicians and civil servants deemed to be obstructing the implementation of Dayton, and to impose legislative measures when Bosnian political actors could not reach a compromise.<sup>1</sup>” In other words, the High Representative could (and still can) impose the international community's decisions on Bosnian politicians when he finds it necessary.

By the end of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina was scarred by massive population displacement, which had resulted both in exile and in internal displacement. The Commission for Real Property Claims estimated that 1.2 million persons had left the country during the war and were considered refugees; more than one million persons (which was approximately 1/3 of the pre-war population) had been internally displaced. Furthermore, about 329 000 persons were killed or registered as missing during the conflict<sup>2</sup>. UNHCR's estimates are higher: it recorded 2 million IDPs/refugees<sup>3</sup>. During the war, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were living in collective camps<sup>4</sup>. Some had been displaced at the very beginning of the war, others in the summer of 1995. This was the case of women, children and elderly people from Žepa and Srebrenica – two of the three UN-Protected safe areas in Eastern Bosnia<sup>5</sup>.

In light of this massive phenomenon of displacement – underpinned by ethnic cleansing perpetrated, first and foremost, by Bosnian Serb forces – the

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<sup>1</sup> X. Bougarel, E. Helms, G. Duijzings (eds.), *The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Return, Relocation and Property Rights: A Discussion Paper*, Sarajevo, December 1997, pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.unhcr.ba](http://www.unhcr.ba)

<sup>4</sup> Some IDPs were living in factory workers' compounds, others in schools, others in temporary housings built by NGOs specifically for them.

<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1995, after the Bosnian Serb forces overran Žepa and Srebrenica, there was much speculation among NGOs about the possible fall of Goražde, which was the third UN-protected safe area. Some NGOs were thus getting ready for an influx, in Central Bosnia, of IDPs from Goražde. The war ended in the fall of 1995, and Goražde was spared.

issue of return was a cornerstone of the Dayton Peace Accords. *Annex 7* of the Accords is dedicated to facilitating the return of displaced populations. In the field, return was indeed important for IDPs and exiles: people wanted to go back to their homes – even if they had been damaged or destroyed, and there was indeed a great excitement and movement of people to their pre-war residence in the winter of 1995-1996<sup>6</sup>. The right to return was also designed to restore a pre-war territorially and nationally mixed community in the country. This ideal of a pre-war multi-national/multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina has been challenged by anthropologists who have studied Yugoslavia since the 1960s<sup>7</sup>, as well as by contemporary scholars, and their perspectives are useful in understanding the overall context of return after the 1992-95 conflict<sup>8</sup>. However, my interviews in the field showed that the desire to leave collective centers and to resume one's life was prevalent in the months that followed the signature of the Peace agreements<sup>9</sup>.

What happened beyond the first rush to pre-war homes? What is the significance of return for IDPs and exiles, in the longer term? What does it concretely entail? Does the policy of return reflect people's needs and wishes? These are some of the questions I examined in my doctoral research work in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2001 and 2004<sup>10</sup>, and on which I will focus in this article. Specifically, I intend to show the relevance of the sociological approach, based on individual interviews, in analyzing a post-war political situation. After exposing my research methodology, I will evaluate the assumptions the policies of return are based upon, in light of my analysis of the

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<sup>6</sup> I personally observed this rush of people in Merkonjić Grad – a town near Banja Luka, in Northern Bosnia – while I was conducting a needs assessment mission for American Refugee Committee in January 1996. People were coming to the town to inspect their homes, despite the lack of utilities (there was no heat, no running water.)

<sup>7</sup> For example, W. G. Lockwood, *European Moslems: Economy and Ethnicity in Western Bosnia*, Academic Press, New York, San Francisco, London, 1975; V. St. Erlich, *Family in Transition: A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1966; T. Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Notably, X. Bougarel, *Bosnie: Anatomie d'un conflit*, La Découverte, Paris, 1996; E. Helms, *Gendered Visions of the Bosnian Future: Women's Activism and Representation*, Pittsburgh University, Pittsburgh (unpublished PhD dissertation), 2003; C. Sorabji, "Managing Memories in Post-War Sarajevo: Individuals, Bad Memories and New Wars", in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> I worked in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the American Refugee Committee from June 1995 to February 1996. I conducted numerous needs assessments and set up a psycho-social support program for Žepa IDPs in the Zenica area.

<sup>10</sup> The field research was conducted mainly from 2001 to 2004 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Cf. S. Bretonnière, *Ancrages collectifs, identité singulière: Parcours de subjectivation de femmes bosniaques depuis la guerre de 1992-95*, EHESS, Paris, 2009 (PhD dissertation); S. Bretonnière, "Nation, religion et genre: se forger une nouvelle identité après la guerre en Bosnie-Herzégovine", in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, X, 2, 2010, pp. 323-348.

discourse of Bosnian returnees. I will show the complexity of return, which relies on the state's commitment to help people rebuild their houses, but also on its capacity to revive the economy and to reinvent a post-socialist social protection network. My contention is that the decision to return, or not, is not uniform nor universal; it is a personal response to fear, trauma, experience in exile or in displacement, and one's ability to adjust to a post-war environment with new constraints (for instance living in Republika Srpska for Bosniacs, as is the case for Srebrenica women), new identity parameters requiring the articulation of primary national identities and of a new Bosnian supranational identity<sup>11</sup>. It is not simply about going home and picking up one's life; it is about being able to forge a new life in an irremediably transformed environment, for people who, themselves, have also been profoundly affected and changed by the war experience.

## II. Research Methodology

My study was carried out by means of 60 individual interviews with Bosniacs, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2001 and 2004<sup>12</sup>. In terms of interview method, I presented the respondents with my research hypothesis, namely that identity was made up of several elements, including religion, gender, nationality, citizenship, work. I would then ask them to respond to that hypothesis: which elements were important to them? How did they articulate them? Were there other elements I had failed to mention and which they considered worth including in their own identity structure? Their job, so to speak, was to think about those different identity aspects, and to present and argue their very own identity make-up, in relation with the war events and the post-war situation. I was therefore demanding an active and a reflexive attitude from my interviewees. As much as possible, I interviewed the same persons from one year to the next, in an effort to map out their trajectories in time and space, but also to confront them – interview after interview, year after year – with their own discourse: what had changed in their identity make-up? Was their confessional identity still prevalent? How did their Serb national identity co-exist with the new supra-national Bosnian identity? How did (s)he, as a Muslim, feel about the new Bosniac identity? Interestingly, interviewees often remembered precisely what they had told me a year before, sometimes three years before.

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<sup>11</sup> V. T. Godina, "The Outbreak of Nationalism on Former Yugoslav Territory: A Historical Perspective on the Problem of Supranational Identity", in *Nations and Nationalism*, 4(3), 1998. Godina argues the Yugoslav identity was a supranational identity, coexisting with primary Serb, Croat, Muslim national identities. With the implementation of the Dayton peace accords, the Bosnian supranational identity (citizenship) replaced the Yugoslav supranational identity.

<sup>12</sup> I have since regularly conducted informal interviews as well.

Asking people to take an active stand on issues both personal and institutional – the new nationality/supra-nationality being first and foremost an institutional and a political construction – from a sociological perspective, allowed people to distance themselves from political and community parameters and injunctions. I was interested in their identity constitution, their reflection upon politically-determined identity dimensions, and their acts upon those collective dimensions. How did they relate to them? How did they make them personal? Did they mobilize other identity resources? It was thus their subjectivity which was at the core of my research project, and my research methodology was intended to reveal this subjectivity<sup>13</sup>. Requesting a strong personal involvement from my interviewees was key in gaining their trust and retaining their long-term interest in the project. Being open to their suggestions was also crucial. Thus, one of my interviewees underscored the importance of the social environment in forging prescribed social roles, and its very strong effect on individual identities. From that point on, I integrated that dimension in my reasoning.

Although this methodological stand was generally well-received, I faced some difficulties. A few persons refused to be interviewed; some interviewees did not want to engage in this clearly personal process, and would give minimal answers. One of the women I interviewed in 2001 made it clear two years later that she no longer wanted to speak to me. She had married, moved to a new town, and although she initially accepted to see me, when I came to the area, she systematically hung up on me when I tried to contact her. Why was this the case? My hypothesis – which cannot be verified, of course – is that this young woman, who had shared her vision of Bosnian society and of the role she wanted to play in it (which was in deep contrast to that of a traditional young, country, Muslim woman), was reluctant to discuss her bold stand. Perhaps she did fail to live up to this standard she had set for herself and did not want to expose the course of events in her life since our last interview. However frustrating, this is not unusual in field work: exposing one's constitutive framework, which necessarily involves acknowledging one's vulnerabilities and uncertainties, can only be willingly offered by the interviewee to the researcher.

Interviews took place in different areas of the country (Federation and Republika Srpska; city and countryside). I travelled to meet my interviewees in their pre-war home once they had resettled there, I kept track of people when they moved out of Bosnia (often to study abroad after the war), I met with exiles (in New York). Within Bosnia, I consistently travelled using the local buses. This was a crucial part of my research method because it unveiled tenuous or unspoken situations. For instance, it revealed invisible borders between areas of Republika Srpska and of the Federation, which would go unnoticed when

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to Alain Touraine's concept of subjectivity, which stipulates that individuals have the ability to distance themselves from norms and to reinterpret them, while maintaining a strong commitment to social relations. Cf. ALAIN TOURAINE, *Critique de la modernité*, Fayard, Paris, 1992.

travelling by car. Thus, taking a bus directly from the Central station in Sarajevo to Višegrad in Eastern Bosnia (part of Republika Srpska) was impossible, at least until 2004. One had to go to the Srpsko Sarajevo bus station to catch a bus to Foča or Belgrade. Similarly, it was impossible to take a bus from Goražde to Višegrad, although the two towns are only 20 minutes apart by car. These frontiers reflected the delicate post-war situation with all the ambiguities, the conflicted memories people were facing. The formal checkpoints of the war had been dismantled, but resistance, plain fear sometimes, were still present and shaped people's attitudes and behaviors in their everyday life and movements. Thus, my host in Goražde – an older Bosniac man who had spent the war in Sarajevo – would not drive me to Višegrad. He was reluctant, he explained to me, to drive through Republika Srpska territory. This was eight years after the war had come to an end. Similarly, some of the Bosnian Serbs from Central Bosnia living in Višegrad since the end of the conflict were hesitant to go back to Novi Travnik, their hometown.

### **III. The Return Policy and IDPs: Confronting a Policy's Assumptions and Returnees' Multi-Layered Discourse and Experience**

#### ***The Right and the Will to Return***

The return policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on the assumption that people have the right to go back to their homes, and that they want to do so. Furthermore, return was meant to erase, in a rapid post-war counter movement, the massive population displacements which had ethnically homogenized the country. Bosnia and Herzegovina – although now a two-entity state – was to regain its pre-conflict shape, reintegrate all its refugees and IDPs. In fact, one of the indicators of post-war policies' success in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the number of returnees<sup>14</sup>. At the micro level, however, return is not a straightforward application of a political decision. Beyond an apparent consensus on return, ambivalence emerged in the discourse of some of the returnees I interviewed over several years.

I conducted a large number of interviews with IDPs in collective centers, most notably around Zenica (Central Bosnia), and Višegrad (Eastern Bosnia). The IDPs in the Zenica area were principally Bosniacs (from Northern Bosnia),

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<sup>14</sup> “Plus d'un million de réfugiés ont regagné leur ville d'origine en Bosnie, soit la moitié de ceux qui ont fui les combats entre 1992 et 1995, a annoncé mardi 21 septembre le Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les Réfugiés (HCR). Fin juillet, 440 000 personnes étaient rentrées de l'étranger et 560 000 d'une autre partie de la Bosnie. Près des trois-quarts des retours se sont faits vers la Fédération croato-musulmane, un quart vers la Republika Srpska (RS) de Bosnie. [...]”, in *Le Monde*, 23 September 2004.

while those in Višegrad were Serbs from Central Bosnia. In one of the Zenica collective centers, my interviewees repeatedly expressed a feeling of anger in light of the impossibility of return, and because of the poor living conditions in the center. One woman had come back from exile in Germany (on a voluntary repatriation program) to find she could not go back to her hometown because her house had been burnt down, and no help was provided to rebuild it; an older lady was upset because she could not return to her home which was occupied by Serbs from Vareš. The living conditions in this collective center were harsh – people were staying in what used to be workers' barracks, they were 14 kilometers from town, there was no public transport, they had no way of making a living, and were thus dependant on external aid. The future seemed non-existent.

In a second IDP settlement, where people had individual homes (built by Norwegian People's Aid, a Norwegian Non-Governmental Organization, during the war), the atmosphere was less gloomy. I interviewed a lady who was getting ready to move back to Prijedor; she was very happy about returning to her home, and although aware of the problems she would likely be facing, she was optimistic. I also interviewed a woman called Fatima<sup>15</sup>. This is how she introduced herself:

“I was born in 1965 and I have three children (a son who is 21, a daughter who is 13 and a second daughter who is 5). I'm from a village near Doboj, which is called Kotorsko. We left our house on May 8, 1992. The civil protection unit in the village was taking care of water. They managed to put us on trucks, on buses, to move us to Slavonski Brod (a town). On May 9, in the evening, they didn't know what to do with us – would we go to Slovenia, would we turn back. We stayed and slept there. The next day, we were put on the train, some of my neighbors got off in Zagreb if they had family, some of us went to Slovenia. We were settled in basketball playgrounds. We stayed in Slovenia for five months. Then I turned back to Zenica. Not in this house, but one or two years in those black barracks over there [behind the settlement]. Then I came to Rabija and we became roommates.”<sup>16</sup>

I exposed my research object, which was to understand how women articulated their identities in post-war Bosnia. She then quickly said the most important thing for her was to go back to her home. Her husband was in Kotorsko at the time, and had started rebuilding their house. We discussed the importance of religion, of work, as well as the difficulties of finding a secondary school for her elder daughter in Kotorsko or Doboj, the nearest town to her village. Going back to Kotorsko seemed a given, some kind of absolute and unquestionable goal. At the very end of the interview, however, there was a breach in the previously linear discourse on return: Fatima said she had envisioned leaving Bosnia, and going to Canada, where her sister-in-law lived. Her husband did not want to go, however, and she rallied his position. But

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<sup>15</sup> All the names were changed.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Fatima, 5 May 2001, Zenica.



furthermore, Fatima then explained how she was scared in her home village: “In my mother’s house, there are Serbs and I have been there for nine nights and I was like a guard, looking out the window, all night, everybody was sleeping, I was going from window to window (laughing). They say I’m scared of my shadow<sup>17</sup>.”

It thus emerged that returning to Kotorsko was not her choice, in spite of what she had said at the beginning of the interview. It was an institutional constraint (IDPs could not stay in temporary housing indefinitely), as well as her husband's choice. She had to resign herself to that sole option, which meant mastering her fear and all the memories of the war it contained.

Two years later, I went to visit Fatima in Kotorsko. The entire village was in the process of being rebuilt, and Fatima's house was partially repaired: the ground floor was divided into two bedrooms and a bathroom, and a large living room and kitchen. Fatima herself was beaming with glee. She explained the process that led to their move:

“We formally moved on May 21, 2002. We got a donation in materials, but we made all this with our hands. This room here (the living room) was used by someone to park the car and behind this wall, they kept the pigs. The house used to be made of concrete, now it is made up of bricks. The space had been destroyed. So we had to rebuild it from the beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

I asked her about the fear she had mentioned two years before:

“SB: When I saw you two years ago, you had come back for a few days, sawed the potatoes, and you said you were scared to come back, and didn’t want to come back? How is it now?”

Fatima: I don’t think about that anymore. We plant a lot of different vegetables. This is the fight for survival.”

Paving the way to a productive life was Fatima's priority in this first phase of return. There was no time, no physical or mental space for fear, it seemed. One had to go on and try to reach normality. She thus said that when she had coffee with her Serb neighbors, what mattered was the fact of being together, of being equal. Making ends meet was a daily struggle and that was what she was focusing on:

“The positive thing is that we came back on our land, that we are all alive. The only negative thing is that we don’t have a job. The only source of money is when you hire some workers – only construction works but for short periods of time, with no pension contributions. It’s good when you have someone in your family – and that is our case – my brother is a plumber and he puts pipes through houses, and my son is his assistant, learning that job alone, and he gets paid for that.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Fatima, 5 May 2001, Zenica.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Fatima, June 2003, Kotorsko.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Fatima, June 2003, Kotorsko.

On our next visit to Kotorako, a year later, Fatima had lost her radiant energy. She told us about her health condition, about her daughter's difficulties in school, and touched upon – reluctantly – her precarious financial situation. Being home had become a hardship for everyone in the family. Finding work was unpredictable and very irregular – Fatima and her husband worked in the agricultural sector during the summer, but work was hard to come by in the winter. Their son was now in Sarajevo, working on construction sites, but without contracts. Their daughter – who used to be a good student in Zenica – had to retake her exams in September. When discussing it with her, I found out it was difficult for her – a Muslim girl – to study in a predominantly Serb school. Insults were not rare.

In this second phase of return, Fatima and her family were confronted with the harsh realities of the social, political and economic situation. Living in one's former home was the easy part; but how did one – or rather the community – transform the environment into an economically viable space? The furniture factory where Fatima used to work did not hire her back (it was unclear whether this was a discriminatory measure against Bosniacs, or whether this was because the business was slow). If return is understood as a time warp to the pre-war Yugoslav social and economic system, it is doomed to failure, precisely because this social and economic system no longer exists. And yet, the policy of return is partly based on this assumption, thus trapping returnees in economically and socially precarious situations.

### **Adjusting to the Post-War Environment**

The policy of return is also based on the assumption that IDPs and exiles will easily and quickly re-adapt to their former environment. Is that the case for exiles who come home? I met a number of young Bosniac women who had been exiled to Germany or Arab countries (Jordan, Saudi Arabia). In their case, return was a political act – it was their way of confirming their legitimate right to Bosnian citizenship. I also interviewed Domenika, a young Catholic woman from Sarajevo, who spent the entire war in Zagreb. Going back to Sarajevo was not a difficult decision. The day she returned, she said, was the most wonderful day of her life:

“Because when I was in Zagreb, I was always thinking about me when I was really young, and I was in this very big pyjama, looking through the window and everything was white, it was in the winter. That was the picture I remembered. For this long period, I was in Zagreb. And this view that I had, mountains, houses and things, the trams. When I came in my flat, after nine years, I was like just standing on that window and I said I have my view again. And that was the best thing that happened to me. And after Zagreb, my flat was so big, you couldn't imagine! Because we lived in one-room flat, in Zagreb, the four

of us. (laughing). So, this was really, it was great. And I felt like I never went anywhere. Like I was there all the time. It was so easy to forget those eight years somewhere else.”<sup>20</sup>

There was no fear involved in coming back (her father ensured her, her sister and her mother left the country at the very beginning of the conflict; she only came back in 2000, more than five years after the end of the war), but rather this avid need to find solace in the apartment of her childhood. Although the conditions of return were different, Domenika – like Fatima – was happy to come home. As for Fatima, this time period was one of felicity. Domenika felt serene: “It feels like [I] got [my] future back. Because in Zagreb, I felt like I had two histories: the one I had in Sarajevo, and the one I had in Zagreb. And now I got my history back. And only one.”<sup>21</sup>

I met Domenika again three years later. She had spent a year in the Netherlands where she had studied international law, had then attempted to go to Malta to further her studies, but eventually had to come back to Sarajevo, because of lack of funding. This second return was very hard on her, because it unmasked the importance and impact of her exile in Croatia.

“SB: When I met you 3 years ago, you were attached to Sarajevo.

D: Yes. I know, I know.

SB: So that’s changed a bit, maybe.

D: Yes, because you know what – when it’s not your decision to leave, your family decides you should leave a certain place to go somewhere because it’s a special situation. You have to. So I left for Zagreb and I was there for eight years. And I never felt it was my home. Not because someone wanted me to make me feel like a foreigner. I got the citizenship, I had friends, I had a place to live, I had more things than I see and remember about Zagreb than about Sarajevo, because I grew up in Zagreb. But I didn’t know that. Because I thought I had two histories: one was the one I had in Sarajevo before the war, and the second one was an extremely bad one, as a refugee, with all these fucked up things happening. I thought I had to come back to get my history back. So this is what I told you last time. And this is why I was so attached to Sarajevo. Is it disappointment? Yes, probably. Because once you figure: Ok, this is it, I got it back. Thank you very much. So? This is what I wanted to give to this place and this is what I wanted to get from this place; And then you see that a place you had in your mind was actually a place that does not exist anymore. And then you know that your history does not have to have a certain path or way that you thought it has to. That you are allowed to change things, that you are allowed to say: yes, I was stupid thinking this. And I was. But I don’t regret the fact that I came back. Because I would never continue actually living without having this experience.”<sup>22</sup>

As Schütz<sup>23</sup> has shown, the homcomer is necessarily different, changed; although the homcomer is still familiar with the relevance system of the environment (s)he left behind, (s)he has not lived the everyday changes – be

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Domenika, 10 May 2001, Sarajevo.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Domenika, 10 May 2001, Sarajevo.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Domenika, 28 June 2004, Sarajevo.

<sup>23</sup> A. SCHÜTZ, “The Homcomer”, in *American Journal of Sociology*, 50(4), 1945, pp. 369-376.

they minor, may they seem insignificant – of its cultural system. (S)he has also been confronted with different experiences while (s)he was away. In Domenika's case, her life experience in Zagreb has forged her in a different way that her friends' life in Sarajevo under siege shaped them. The war has not scarred her in the same manner, and she found it oppressing that her friends spoke about the war all the time. Furthermore, she no longer accepted certain norms that still characterized Bosnia, such as the gender or the educational norms. She considers the former to be patriarchal, and the latter to be a legacy of the Communist past – a past she cherished not so long before.

When she first came back, her happiness to be home and her commitment to changing Bosnia (she was then working for a NGO) masked the discrepancy between the two biographies (“histories” as she calls them) she had developed. After she came back from the Netherlands, she felt increasingly disconnected from the post-war Bosnian environment:

“Here you have to say what someone else thinks is right. So if the professor says: this is it. You have to say fine, this is what I’m going to tell you when I come to the exam. If I say something else, that’s out of the question. You have to stay within their frame. It’s really funny because here in Bosnia everything is like that. Staying within the borders, the boxes that society, family or whoever puts you in. They say: you are a Bosnian woman, this is how you should behave. If you don’t behave this way, you are either a whore, or I don’t know, crazy, or stupid, or liberal – which is a big insult. And when you put yourself in another society, you see that you are actually normal; Maybe not as liberal as you thought. It’s really funny.”<sup>24</sup>

This second return was painful. Finding work was difficult, her year of study abroad was considered worthless by the Sarajevo University administration. She wanted to leave but thought she should finish her university degree first, although this was proving such an ordeal. She felt trapped in this society from which she had progressively, but inexorably, detached herself.

### ***Choosing not to Return to a Trauma Site***

The return policy assumes a powerful, overwhelming connection between people and their land, their houses. Šeila Kulenović, a Family Liaison Officer with Catholic Relief Services, explained to me in 2001:

“It’s all about return. [Women] dreamed, for ten years they dreamed about returning. Because that’s all they had, that’s all they built with their own hands. They invested their lives in it and it’s been taken away from them. So again it’s this external identity – she identifies herself with this piece of land and house. And she lives for the day. There are elderly people who want to, just want to be buried there. They want to die,

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Domenika, 28 June 2004, Sarajevo.

they go home and they want to die there. I mean, things like that. It's like totally, their whole focus is just to go back home. Because none of them, except the younger people who left the country, or something, none of them felt home [where they were displaced to]."<sup>25</sup>

We have seen with Fatima and Domenika that this affirmation needs qualification, because of the effects of a destroyed economy, or because of the consequences of having lived – and not simply survived – in a different place. People may also be unwilling to return because their war experiences in their home environment were extremely traumatic. This is the case for people who were chased from their homes, for people who were held in camps and tortured and/or raped, and for people whose family members were murdered. The Center for Torture Victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina published a book – based on testimonies – explaining the psychological trauma of torture victims when they return to their homes and face, sometimes on a day-to-day basis, those who tortured them<sup>26</sup>. This important point of view is not welcome in the political arena, precisely because it challenges the imperative, and what is perceived as the fundamentally appropriate and desirable nature of return. UNOCHR was one of the few institutions in Bosnia that tried to underline this perspective, in 2004<sup>27</sup>. There seems to be a slight change in attitude on the part of UNHCR, however. Although their statistics remain focused on the numbers of returnees, those aggregates are accompanied – on the UNHCR Bosnia and Herzegovina website – by articles which point out the unmet needs of IDPs who choose to not to return. The return rhetoric also appears less inflexible in a 2009 contribution to the *Forced Migration Review* by a Senior Protection Officer, and the UNHCR Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

“The challenge facing the international community in the aftermath of ethnic cleansing has been how to strike the right balance between in safeguarding and actively supporting the three durable solutions to which IDPs are entitled: return, local integration or settlement elsewhere. In BiH, strong emphasis on the right to return was instrumental to the large numbers of returns already achieved. And while advocacy of the right to return remains essential, a more comprehensive protection response is now critically overdue, with a strategic reorientation in two directions. First, support for solutions others than return – i.e. Local integration must be available to IDPs. [...] Second, for those IDPs and refugees who have returned, or still hope to do so, much greater effort is required to enable their reintegration, including ensuring access without discrimination to employment opportunities, public services and education, and addressing any security concerns.”<sup>28</sup>

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25 Interview with Šeila Kulenović, Family Liaison Officer, Catholic Relief Services, 11 May 2001, Sarajevo.

26 L. T. Arcel, S. Popović, A. Kučukalić, A. Bravo-mehmedbašić (eds.), *Treatment of Torture and Trauma Survivors in a Post-War Society*, Center for Torture Victims, Sarajevo, 2003.

27 Interview with Jasminka Džumhur, a lawyer (and former judge) with UNOCHR, June 2004.

28 E. MOONEY, N. HUSSAIN, “Unfinished business: IDPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, in *Forced Migration Review*, 33, 2009, p. 23.

This quote indicates a greater degree of permeability to people's subjectivities. For instance, return for people whose relatives have been the victims of mass murders is also extremely difficult. This is the case for Srebrenica women. During my research, I met a number of women from Srebrenica and its surroundings, who had been displaced in July 1995 to Tuzla. I spoke with one of them, Mirsada, on several occasions. Mirsada's father, as well as her husband, her father-in-law and her brother-in-law went missing after Srebrenica fell to Bosnian Serb forces on July 11, 1995. Her father's body was found and identified in 2002; he was then buried in his village near Srebrenica. In Tuzla, Mirsada was living in a collective center, and working for Bosfam, an NGO that had been set up with the support of Oxfam.

When I first interviewed Mirsada in 2001, she said the most important thing would be for her to be able to go home. Unfortunately, her house had been destroyed and the area was inhospitable (Srebrenica is in Republika Srpska). Later in the interview, however, Mirsada mentioned that she would have liked to go abroad, but didn't have enough money. As with Fatima, the first, seemingly spontaneous, response is return, but a more profound – perhaps less legitimate – desire to leave behind all the trauma and to move on to a different country emerges at the end of the interview. When I met Mirsada again two years later, she no longer wanted to go back to Srebrenica: “I would rather stay here than go to Srebrenica because there are no people; lots of them are dead. I don't have any wishes to go there. What I really want most is to go to the US, that's for sure.”<sup>29</sup>

Her brothers had migrated there, they were living in Texas, and she now wished to join them. It seemed, however, that her application had come in too late and it was very unlikely she would obtain a refugee status from US authorities. From then on, her resolve not to return to Srebrenica became stronger. Srebrenica symbolized death. It also represented a country mentality, in particular gender norms, she was struggling with. She thus considered her parents had been stupid not to give her any education. She did not want to repeat the same mistake with her own daughters (she has two daughters and one son). She wanted her children to go to school as long as possible, and then work. She wanted her daughters to gain their financial independence. She explained, at the same time, that her girls needed to learn how to cook. However difficult this would be, she wanted to create the conditions of a different life for her children. This meant finding a place in the city and distancing oneself from the habits, norms, *habitus* of the countryside. This is a perilous exercise in a Bosnian society where the urban-rural divide is strong and remains one of the prominent characteristic of the post-war era<sup>30</sup>. Nonetheless, giving her children

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mirsada, July 2003, Tuzla.

<sup>30</sup> S. BRETONNIERE, *Ancrages collectifs, identité singulière: Parcours de subjectivation de femmes bosniaques depuis la guerre de 1992-95*, passim; A. STEFANSSON, “Urban Exile:

the opportunity to become urbanites was important to Mirsada, and was part of a process of forging a new life away from Srebrenica.

#### IV. Conclusion

The first article of *Annex 7* of the Dayton Peace Accords states that:

“All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them. The early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The parties confirm that they will accept the return of such persons who have left their territory, including those who have been accorded temporary protection by third countries.”

Article II.1. underlines the necessity of providing a suitable environment:

“The parties undertake to create in their territories the political, economic, and social conditions conducive to the voluntary return and harmonious reintegration of refugees and displaced persons, without preference for any particular group. The Parties shall provide all possible assistance to refugees and displaced persons and work to facilitate their voluntary return in a peaceful, orderly and phased manner, in accordance with the UNHCR repatriation plan.”

The legitimate and desirable nature of return is hardly questioned at the local and international institutional levels. Return remains an absolute goal. This policy, however, fails to consider the variable subjectivities of refugees and IDPs, as well as the circumstances that affect those subjectivities. Some of those circumstances are systemic, most notably economic in nature. Contrary to the provisions of Article II of *Annex 7*, the economic conditions are not satisfactory. In reality, the overall economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is disastrous; the unemployment level is close to 40 percent. Furthermore, services provided by the state are uneven (some cantons cannot afford the maternity leaves of their constituents).

The willingness to return is also linked to personal circumstances and experience during the war. Fear, but also the desire to leave behind the trauma of the war, are powerful factors in the decision to return or not. In addition, one's personal development during exile or displacement also contributes to a person's ability to happily reintegrate a pre-war home. As Domenika's experience demonstrates, the time of exile is not necessarily suspended time for

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Locals, Newcomers and the Cultural Transformation of Sarajevo”, in X. Bougarel, E. Helms, G. Duijzings (eds.), *op. cit.*

refugees. Other women we met during our research confirmed this. Yet, refugees are often characterized as living in a state of limbo<sup>31</sup>. In recent years, however, this perspective of displacement as a motionless, unproductive time period has been challenged by a number of authors, especially from the point of view of conflicting identities and memories<sup>32</sup>. The work of Katharina Inhetveen on Angolan refugees in Zambia, for instance, illustrates the constitution of a home in refugee camps in the host country, for some refugees:

“As Domingos Kapalo, who fled from Angola in 1966, expresses it: ‘Life in Meheba has become part of us, so it’s like, it’s a home, it’s life no longer in an alien land, but life at home’ (translated from Luvale).

Also Nene Muswema, an old woman living in Meheba since the early seventies, sees Zambia as her home: ‘I am here in Zambia. Zambia is my country because it is where God has safeguarded my life, which was about to be taken away by the soldiers who invaded my home with guns in the vehicle wanting to shoot at me and kill me’ (translated from Chokwe).

She even insists that she would not find the place where she lived in Angola. This definitely disqualifies it as ‘home,’ since intimate knowledge and belonging are closely connected: ‘Thinking of going back, I will not know the place. I will not know even a bit of that place. If I went looking for the place (...), I would not know it.’

With the perception of the place of refuge as home, life there becomes normality.”<sup>33</sup>

As the second testimony shows, the fear, or the trauma resulting from having been threatened, plays a crucial part when deciding whether to return, and subsequently, where to make a home. One of my interviewees in Bosnia made a similar decision not to go back to her hometown, which she left when Serb forces arrived, where her father was murdered, and her uncle tortured<sup>34</sup>.

Understanding the multiple factors that affect a refugee's or a displaced person's decision to return, understanding the process itself as it unfolds in time, require a 'bottom-up' ethnographic research method<sup>35</sup>. It also demands a

<sup>31</sup> A. Chauvenet, V. Despret, J. M. Lemaire (eds.), *Clinique de la reconstruction: Une expérience avec des réfugiés en ex-Yougoslavie*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> The work of Liisa Makkli on refugees in Tanzania, and the latter's engagement in a new life in their host country, as well as the works of George Bisharat, and of Julie Peteet on Palestinians and their relationship to an abstract Palestine, are quoted by K. S. BROWN, “Homelands in Question: Paradoxes of Memory and Exile in South Eastern Europe – Introduction”, in *Balkanologie*, V, 1 & 2, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> KATHARINA INHETVEEN, “*Because we are refugees: Utilizing a Legal Label*”, *UNHCR Working Paper 130, New Issues in Refugee Research*, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, UNHCR, Geneva, October 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews with Jasmina in 2003 and 2004, Sarajevo.

<sup>35</sup> “Bosnia from below” is the term used by the editors of *The New Bosnian Mosaic* to explain their choice of perspective in analyzing post-war Bosnia. Cf. X. Bougarel, E. Helms, G. Duijzings (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 19. They specify in their introduction (p. 14): “The impetus for this book came out of the editors' own experiences: as we conducted research in post-war Bosnia (DUIJZINGS 2002b; HELMS 2003a; World Bank 2002), we were struck by the disconnects between 'top-down' political analyses and what we and other researchers were seeing on the ground. [...] The goal is to describe and theorize the dynamics of social and political life from the



continued and committed follow-up of those individuals as they return, or refuse to return, or return and then decide to leave again. Return is a dynamic and multi-directional process, and it needs to be recognized as such. Because it has become an overriding and inflexible ideology, return as a policy needs to be scrutinized, it has to be analyzed in light of those individual subjectivities that are affected by it, if one wishes to delineate institutional discourse and the complex social reality, not only of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also of other post-conflict contexts<sup>36</sup>.

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perspective of those who do not appear in dominant, 'top-down' historical and political analyses (see e.g. ERIKSEN 1995)."

<sup>36</sup> KATHARINA INHETVEEN, "Democratizing Camp Refugees: Democracy-Building Practices as Education and Legitimation in Long-Term Refugee Camps", *Paper Work at the World Congress of the International Sociological Association* (July 11-17, 2010, Göteborg) in which she explored "the conditions of the wish to repatriate" of Angolan refugees in Zambia. She thus made the distinction between two types of discourses: 'I want to return' vs. 'I have to return', in light of the legal status and the material aid given to refugees by local and international institutions, such as UNHCR. She thus asked the question of 'who makes the decision, and under what constraints, to return?'